

## Assessment

# New Commonwealth spirit is seen at Ottawa

by Derek Ingram\*

If a graph were to be drawn of the Commonwealth's political fortunes since 1961 – the year of South African withdrawal – it would move down to its lowest point at 1966, rise markedly at 1969, drop back several points at 1971 and now, after the Heads of Government meeting in Ottawa August 2–10, stand at its highest for that whole period.

It was in the mid-Sixties that the Commonwealth came near to collapse following Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Rhodesia. If any member country had withdrawn from the association at that time – and at one point in 1966 Zambia very nearly did so – a domino action would in all likelihood have followed. The atmosphere at the two Heads of Government conferences in 1966 – in Lagos and then in London – was bitter and for the next three years there was no summit meeting. It was a period of Commonwealth sickness and convalescence.

The meeting that followed in London in 1969 was largely low key and successful, with signs already of a better understanding and atmosphere developing.

The wind was set fair for the next conference in Singapore in 1971 until the South African arms sales dispute blew up a few months before. The issue bedevilled the entire meeting, though good also came out of it all and perhaps it is Singapore that will eventually be seen as the actual turning point meeting. As President Nyerere is reported to have said in Ottawa: "We all learned at Singapore".

For turning point there has almost certainly been, with the Commonwealth set on a new, constructive and rewarding path along which, with luck, it can now proceed.

After Ottawa the question is no longer asked by the doubters whether there will be another Commonwealth summit conference (or indeed a Commonwealth); the only questions now are where and when it will take place and whether the procedures that were developed so successfully at Ottawa can and should be further refined.

The ingredients for success last August were many, and the thorough planning which went on for most of the two and a half years between Singapore and Ottawa and the consequent increased informality

of the actual sessions, though of vital importance, was only one of them.

The conference could not have succeeded without the willingness of the participants to make a success of it. No amount of preparation could have avoided trouble if the participants had arrived, as in earlier years, in a mood for confrontation.

Luck plays its role too. The conference sat at a period of quiet in world affairs; if, for example, the shooting of Africans at Western Deep Levels gold mine in South Africa had happened during the conference instead of a few weeks later tempers may have risen somewhat.

The actual moment of Commonwealth truth probably occurred during the last day or two of the Singapore meeting. There was then a sudden realisation by those present that it was all going wrong. In the wearying sessions over South African arms sales, culminating in one meeting that went long into the night, the Commonwealth had almost torn itself apart. Yet no one in his heart wanted to tear it apart. The presidents and prime ministers looked over the brink and did not like what they saw, but looking the other way they also saw that because they were now over 30 in number their conferences were developing tendencies dangerously like those that dog the United Nations.

In those dying hours of the Singapore talks it was seen that drastic surgery was required and none was more certain about this need than the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr. Pierre Trudeau. Before he flew off he offered Ottawa as the next meeting place. It was an act of faith.

The conference asked the Commonwealth Secretariat to work out new procedures, and Mr. Trudeau, as the next host, set about preparations for the Ottawa meeting of a kind that the Commonwealth had never embarked on before. They included the despatch of his personal assistant, Mr. Ivan Head, to every one of the 32 countries of the Commonwealth where he discussed with all but two of the presidents and prime ministers detailed plans for the meeting.

Mr. Trudeau, who has himself confessed that he became a convert to the concept of the Commonwealth after he became Prime Minister, had seen at the 1969 conference in London – the first he attended – what was going wrong. He believed the meeting should much more take the form of a series of informal debates with interventions and questioning and without set speeches – certainly no long ones.

In 1969 Mr. Trudeau sat at Marlborough House and listened, making a point or two from time to time. At Singapore he played a vital role, but again he made no long speech, preferring to intervene every now and again.

Many of the other leaders, however, arrived in Singapore armed with texts which they proceeded to read out to the conference and then to issue to the press. Their words were directed as much at their public back home as at their colleagues round the conference table. Afterwards they would hold often emotional press conferences and give TV interviews. What was supposed to be a secret conference became almost a public one.

Each leader had four officials sitting behind him at the table, thus filling the room with something like 200 people. The informality of the occasion was lost and with it much of its value.

At Ottawa all this was changed. Only two officials could sit in and the room where all but two of the sessions took place was small and intimate in style.

Not all the texts disappeared and not everyone spoke briefly, but far fewer leaders brought prepared speeches and those who spoke at some length – President Nyerere of Tanzania on Rhodesia, for instance – were so good that their colleagues wanted to listen to every word. There was more of the atmosphere of a lively parliamentary debate, with points being picked up and queried as the discussion proceeded. Mr. Edward Heath, the British Prime Minister, a severe critic of the Singapore procedures, was often to be seen enjoying himself at Ottawa, scoring points here and there in a parliamentary manner.

Only once in the ten days at Ottawa did there return for a brief moment any hint of the bitterness and that, predictably, was on Rhodesia. But by now the overall atmosphere was so good that within a few minutes tempers were damped down, with Mr. Heath and Dr. Nyerere taking the lead in doing so.

If there was criticism this time about the mode of procedure it was to the effect that so much care had been taken by Mr. Trudeau and others to ensure a smooth conference that there could be a danger of inducing in the proceedings a state of such calm and equanimity that the whole exercise would be rendered meaningless.

This was not the case at Ottawa, where a greater variety of subjects was tackled than perhaps at any Commonwealth conference for more than a decade. It had been a favourite criticism of previous conferences that they were always domin-

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